

The Magic of the Sublime

In the painting, “The Artist in His Studio” (c. 1629), we see a bare room, except for the very young artist—Rembrandt was about 23 when it was painted—who holds his brush and a few other objects, as he looks at a large canvas on an easel across the room. The light falls along the edge of the canvas, and on the painter’s face. The subject of the painting is *cognition*. “This is just a bare workplace with a painter who is not working, but looking—or thinking. But *thinking* may be the very key to the meaning of this painting,” observes author Ernst van de Wetering.

In fact, one of the things scientific analysis of the physical properties of Rembrandt’s paintings shows, as elaborated in this fascinating book, is that Rembrandt did not make preliminary drawings; rather, he only made drawings *when he was in the process of changing the composition of the painting, in order to try out a new solution*.

In other words, Rembrandt thoroughly-composed the work *in his mind*, before he ever put pen to paper, or paint to canvas, in such a way that the

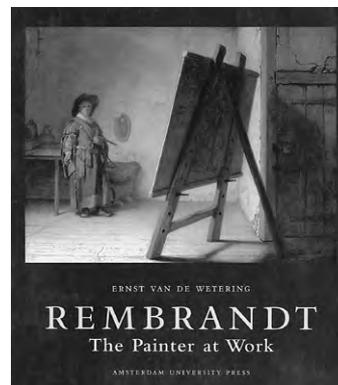
concept was carried throughout the entire composition.

Art of the Sublime

The genius of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69) is universally acknowledged, yet, among today’s culturally and scientifically clueless, the method by which he produced his masterpieces, is viewed by many as magical. Even during Rembrandt’s lifetime, rumors circulated that he was secretive about his method of working. One contemporary wrote: “There is . . . no way to figure out how he did it; consequently this invention . . . was carried with its inventor to the grave.”

In 1854, the German art critic Eduard Kolloff wrote of Rembrandt’s late paintings: “Very meticulous connoisseurs . . . are disconcerted by his manner of painting and find themselves at a loss: unable to discover how his pictures are made, they can do no better than declare that the hermetically sealed facture of his paintings is sorcery, and that even the painter himself had no clear understanding of how it was done.”

As late as 1876, the French painter



**Rembrandt:
The Painter at Work**
by Ernst van de Wetering
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Eugène Fromentin wrote: “As to his technique, Rembrandt painted, sketched, and etched like no one else. His works in themselves were a mystery. People admired him with a certain uneasiness; he was followed [by his contemporaries] without being fully understood. His work was regarded rather as that of an alchemist.”

But in *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work*, Ernst van de Wetering swings open a door into Rembrandt’s studio, which permits us to look over the shoulder of the greatest of the Seventeenth-century Dutch Masters, so that we may watch as he painted, to see just how he produced his “magical” works. The past 150 years or so have provided many new techniques for analyzing the physical and topographical aspects of a work of art, and van de Wetering explores these for us with admirable thoroughness. Even so, after all the spectroscopy, radiography, chemical analysis, and whatnot, there is still nothing in those materials which can account for the ineffable quality of that human mind which transformed those physical materials into the art of the sublime.

In an insightful comparison of two seemingly similar works, both painted in the mid-1630’s, one by Rembrandt, the other by Nicolaes Eliasz (known as Pickenoy), van de Wetering identifies what defines Rembrandt’s genius. Each is a portrait of a Dutch burgher’s wife;



Rembrandt van Rijn, “The Artist in His Studio,” c. 1629.

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Above left: Rembrandt van Rijn, "Portrait of Haesje van Cleyburg," 163(4). **Above right:** Nicolaes Elias (called Pickenoy), "Portrait of an Unknown Woman," c. 1635. **Details:** Rembrandt (below left), Pickenoy (below right).



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each is seen in a three-quarter view; each wears a white cap, and a large white pleated ruff around her neck. At first glance, it is difficult to discern any important differences; both portraits seem exceptionally well done. Van de Wetering writes: "Where Pickenoy pays close attention to each detail, modelling clearly and sharply (and at first sight more convincingly), Rembrandt uses the brush more loosely and fleetingly, and avoids sharpness in his contours and inner drawing. One only has to look at the catchlights in the eye, and the errant gleams on the slightly greasy skin under the eye and on the lower lip to see how, notwithstanding the formulaic use of illusionistic devices, the emphasis in his work is on the casualness, the almost chance nature of such effects. Alongside

the monumentally moulded, frozen forms of Pickenoy, Rembrandt's figure appears to be alive. *It is as if she is on the very point of changing her expression, or of blinking.*" [emphasis added]

This quality of ambiguity of expression, is precisely that which defines a Classical work of art. Think of the sculpture of Phidias or Praxiteles; think of the smile of the *Mona Lisa*: This is the motion of the mind, the in-betweenness of cognitive transformation given physical expression.

The Self-Portraits

Anyone who has ever experienced the thrill of viewing a late Rembrandt self-portrait (such as that in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., painted 1659), has encountered the eerie

and powerful sense that the artist has come alive, and is speaking directly to him.

Van de Wetering reveals a small part of what makes these autobiographical paintings so extraordinarily powerful: "In one of his very last self-portraits . . . executed in 1669 [the year of his death—BJ] and now in London, a comparison of the picture with its radiograph reveals [that] more and more of the elements that would catch the lights and draw the eye were painted out, toned down or altered, in order to bring out the 'force' of just one part of the painting—in this case, the face with the steady gaze."

In fact, what Rembrandt has done is revolutionary: Van de Wetering describes his use of impasto (building up the paint to create a topography, or relief) to reflect light and cast shadow, a revolutionary method for creating what

the Italians called "*chiaroscuro*," the interplay of light and shadow to create depth. Furthermore, the "*sfumato*" (smoky quality or blurring of outlines) technique invented by Leonardo da Vinci to create the effect of atmosphere, or what he called aerial perspective, becomes with Rembrandt what van de Wetering calls, "rough *sfumato*." "Rembrandt evolved

that peculiar, rough *sfumato*, which is effected by dragging a brush loaded with stiff paint over the surface to produce a rough ('perceptible') but still evocative contour or tonal transition, which plays an essential part in the spatial and atmospheric effect of the paintings."

While van de Wetering provides a depth of technical information (which some might find daunting), his discussion of the techniques used to produce some of the most beloved of Rembrandt's works, accompanied by many beautiful reproductions and details, will captivate even the most casual reader. For anyone struggling to understand the history of art, or better yet, for those who wish to follow in Rembrandt's footsteps as artists, this book is indispensable.

—Bonnie James